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ABSTRACT

Some adult learners and teachers have negative memories of their previous encounters with poetry because too much emphasis was placed on the poem's "intent" or dissecting poems to determine their rhyme schemes. However, poetry can be an effective complement to instruction in adult literacy classrooms and can serve as an effective instructional tool for both reading and writing. Because the readability of individual poems ranges from very easy to more complex, instructors can plan whole group instruction using poetry even when learners' reading levels vary. Whether students read poems independently or the instructor reads poems aloud while students follow along with their own copies, poems provide valuable materials for comprehension lessons. Poems can be useful resources for helping beginning readers develop fluency and phonics knowledge. Literacy learners can also write poetry with appropriate scaffolds and support from their teacher. Writing a class poem is another good introductory lesson. Copy change (which entails students using another author's framework to create their own writing) and form poems are effective poetry-writing exercises. To assess students' use of poetry for reading or writing, literacy instructors must first consider their instructional goals. By combining their own assessments with students' self-assessments, instructors can determine whether students are achieving program goals. (MN)

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Teacher to Teacher

Poetry in the Adult Literacy Classroom

Nancy Padak

Poetry in the adult literacy classroom? Yes indeed. Some learners (and teachers) have negative memories of their previous encounters with poetry because too much emphasis was placed on "the poet's intent" or on dissecting poems to determine their rhyme schemes or on memorizing definitions for literary terms like *personification* and *alliteration*. Fortunately, it doesn't have to be that way. The purposes of this brief publication are to provide a rationale for using poetry with adult learners and to describe several uses of poetry for both reading and writing.

Why Use Poetry?

Many poems are easy to read. Even very beginning readers can read poetry successfully with some initial assistance from the teacher, tutor, or a more able colleague. And most poems naturally invite response. Moreover, "word family poems," explained below, can provide an authentic context for teaching onsets and rimes (phonics). So poetry can offer engaging, successful reading experiences for adult learners. The same is true for writing. Writing poetry is a great way to build students' self-confidence as writers. After they have begun to think of themselves as writers, other more challenging types of writing will be easier for students to conquer.

Poetry is an effective complement to instruction. You can read a poem or two aloud in each instructional session. These read alouds provide models of fluent reading and may also supply a prompt for journal writing (e.g., How did the poem make you feel? What did the poem remind you of? Is this an effective poem? Why do you think so?) or simply serve as a beginning-the-class routine. Because poems range in readability from very easy to more complex, you can plan whole group instruction using poetry even when learners' reading levels vary.

Adding poetry to content study can make subjects come alive. Go to the children's section the next time you visit the public library. Look for these titles and think about the ways you can integrate poetry into social studies and science:

Nature: *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices* (Fleishman, P.)
Navajo: Visions and Voices Across the Mesa (Begay, S.)
Snow Toward Evening (Frank, J.)
Star Walk (Simon, S.)
Water Dance (Locker, T.)
Winter Poems (Rogasky, B.)

War: *Bearing Witness* (Rochman, H., & McCampbell, D.)
Harriet and the Promised Land (Lawrence, J.)
I Never Saw Another Butterfly (Volavkova, H.)
In Flanders Field (Granfield, L.)
Paul Revere's Ride (Longfellow, H.W.)

These are just two broad topics and a few of the many poetry books that show the possibilities for integrating poetry into content study. For more examples, try searching the OLRC's online resource for teachers, *Recommended Trade Books for Adult Literacy Programs*, http://literacy.kent.edu/Oasis/Resc/Trade/index.html.

Poetry and Reading

Response to reading is critical to comprehension, and response and poetry go hand in hand. Response activities such as Bleich's Heuristic, Sketch to Stretch, or Agree? Disagree? Why? work particularly effectively with poems. (Descriptions of these strategies may be found at http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/read-listen.html.) Students can read poems independently, or you can read the poems aloud while students follow along with their own copies. Either way, poems provide valuable materials for comprehension lessons.

The lyrics of many songs are poems. This is another good source of reading material, especially for beginners, since the melody provides a scaffold for reading success. To help students "hear" the poetry in music, bring a tape recorder and a cassette of songs to class. Try to select songs that stu-

dents will find at least somewhat familiar. Beatles music might work well; if students are parents, songs from popular Disney movies will likewise be effective. Play a song through without interruption. Then play it again, stopping occasionally so that students can write the lyrics. When the lyrics are written, ask students to read them as a poem. Discussion or writing may follow: How are the lyrics different when spoken? What strengths and weaknesses do the lyrics have as a piece of poetry rather than as words to a song? Students may want to capture the lyrics of their own favorite songs as a follow-up activity. If interest warrants it, group inquiry might focus on the poetry of a particular recording artist.

Beginning readers need to develop fluency. Poetry can be a useful resource for this instructional goal as well. One particularly effective way to use poetry to promote fluent reading and build sight vocabulary is the Fluency Development Lesson (Description may be found at http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/read-listen.html.) Occasional poetry festivals (or "slams") can provide authentic reasons for students to learn poetry. These festivals are times for students to read poetry to one another. Students volunteer to read poems that they've been practicing, either alone or with partners. You might even want to create a coffee-house mood with dimmed lighting, the arrangement of furniture, a music stand and stool for the readers to use, and so forth. These dramatic readings provide a time to celebrate poetry and students' reading achievements.

Beginning readers also need to develop phonics knowledge. Most reading experts advise us not to teach sounds in isolation, but rather to focus instruction on onsets and rimes. An onset is the part of a syllable that precedes the vowel (e.g., the b in *bat*, the r in *rat*). A rime, also know as a phonogram or word family, is the part of the syllable that contains the vowel and any consonants that follow it (e.g., -at in *bat* and *rat*). Writing and reading word family poems helps students learn these important concepts. To get started with a word family poem, select a rime or word family, write it on the chalkboard or a piece of chart paper, and invite students to brainstorm words that contain the rime. One-syllable words are usually mentioned first. Encourage students to think of longer words as well. When lots of words are listed, invite students (alone or in pairs) to use them to write poems. Two-line tongue twisters are often a good way to begin. A useful reference for these activities, an online rhyming dictionary, is located at http://rhyme.lycos.com/.

Poetry and Writing

Writing poetry is easy with appropriate scaffolds and support from the teacher. A good introductory lesson involves inviting each student to find a favorite poem. A class discussion can follow, in which students share their ideas about what makes a good poem. You can make notes about this conversation on chart paper or the chalkboard. If students don't mention it, be sure to point out that poems don't need to rhyme. You may want to make handouts of students' ideas about the characteristics of good poems. They can keep these sheets in their writing folders to use as they draft their own poems and respond to those of others.

Writing a class poem is another good introductory lesson. To prepare, you'll need index cards and a chalkboard or chart paper. Together with students, decide on a topic for the poem. A good topic will evoke sensory images, say the birth of a child or attending an Indians game or eating one's favorite dessert. Put the selected topic on the chalkboard or chart paper. Then invite students to share words and phrases related to the topic. You might want to prompt their brainstorming. Using the Indians game as an example, you might ask, What can you smell? How does it sound? What can you see? What does it remind you of? How do you feel? and so forth. As words and phrases are suggested, copy them on the chalkboard or chart paper in print large enough for all to see. Now give each student an index card, and ask him or her to select a favorite phrase (or combine words to make a new one) to write on the index card. Collect the cards, and read the poem! Depending on the size of the group, you might want to shuffle the cards a couple of times, and read the resulting poems.

Copy change is another effective poetry writing activity. In copy change, students use another author's framework to create their own writing. (For more information, see http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/writing.html.) An excellent poem to introduce copy change to students is Judith Viorst's (1981) "If I Were in Charge of the World." After students understand the concept of copy change, you can invite them to use the strategy independently in their own writing.

Form poems are also fun to write. Here are three types of form poems, all relatively easy to develop. In each case, you might initially conduct a whole-group lesson that leads to a class poem before encouraging independent use of the forms. The lesson should involve selecting a topic and brainstorming words to use in the poems. As with other whole-group lessons, writing students' contributions on the chalkboard or chart paper will facilitate their work. Whole-group lessons give students supported opportunities to understand how the forms work, which in turn will lead to subsequent success.

Name Poems/ Acrostics: Students think of a word related to the poem they wish to write. This word is written vertically down the left side of the paper. The first letter of the word is the first letter of the first line of the poem. The second letter of the word is the first letter of the second line of the poem, and so forth. Individual lines can be single words, phrases, or sentences.

Diamante: This form poem gets its name from its shape—diamond. Although more complicated formats exist, here's a good one:

noun

adjective adjective

-ing verb -ing verb -ing verb

adjective adjective

noun

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Shape Poems: The final draft of a shape poem (also called a concrete poem) takes the physical shape of the thing described. Sometimes the words themselves create the shape. Other times, the lines are set to approximate the shape, which is then drawn around the poem.

For many years, Ken Koch (2000) has worked to support students' poetry writing. His *Comparison Poems* invite students to describe something metaphorically. In his *I Wish Poems*, each line either begins with "I wish" or contains the words somewhere. In *I Used To/ But Now Poems* students compare past and present (or appearances and reality) with regard to some aspect of themselves. For example, they might write, "I used to think.../But now I know..." or "I used to be... /But now I am..." or "I seem to be.../But really I am...." Each of these forms might be introduced in a whole-group lesson. Making class or individual poetry books is a great way to encourage others to read students' poetry and to celebrate students as authors.

A Few Words About Assessment

To assess students' use of poetry for reading or writing, you first need to think about your instructional goals. In reading, you might be using poetry to encourage response, to develop fluency, or to foster understanding of phonograms or word families. Fluency might be a goal for writing as well. Other potential writing goals include willingness to write, ability to revise, mechanical features of the final draft, and so forth. Dated, anecdotal notes about the extent to which you believe the student has achieved the goal can be added to the student's portfolio. These notes need not be lengthy. In fact, a three-point assessment (excellent, OK, poor) might serve you well. You might also want to invite students to reflect on their own goal achievement. These documents, too, can be added to portfolios. Over time, students' self-assessments combined with your own assessments will enable you to determine whether students are achieving the goals that shape your program.

Finally, you may want to assess the role of poetry in your literacy program. Certainly reading and writing poems has value beyond practice. Poetry study-- including performance, composition, and appreciation—can become a valuable addition to your program. Give it a try!

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